

WHO WAS THE EXECUTIONER OF KING CHARLES THE FIRST?

CASES of "historic doubt" seem to be the legitimate property of the novelist. The mystery which has enveloped the executioner of King Charles the First, the apparent impossibility of fixing the act of beheading upon any man for certain, have opened to the writers of historical romance a fair field for the exhibition of their art. And they have availed themselves of the opportunity. To mention one or two instances: the author of "Whitehall," M. Alexandre Dumas in his "Vingt-ans-Après," and Mr. Sala in his novel of "Captain Dangerous," have introduced to the public various candidates for the distinction of having killed a king. The generally accepted theory, however, is to the effect that the deed was done by the common hangman of the period for a reward of thirty pounds. But the name of the hangman has been less clearly ascertained. Jack Ketch, "a wretch," says Macaulay, "who had butchered many brave and noble victims, and whose name has during a century and a half been vulgarly given to all who have succeeded him in his odious office," was not appointed until about 1682. "While Jeffries on the bench, Ketch on the gibbet sits," says a lampoon of the time. The hanging cruelty exhibited on the occasion of the execution of the unfortunate Duke of Monmouth, nearly led to the destruction of Ketch by the infuriated mob; a strong guard was necessary to save the executioner being torn in pieces. Ketch had succeeded a man named Dun, who is addressed as Squire Dun in a poem by Butler. "The addition of 'squire,'" says an authority, "with which Mr. Dun is dignified, is a mark that he had beheaded some state criminal for high treason, an operation which, according to custom for time out of mind, has always entitled the operator to that distinction." The predecessor of Dun was Gregory Brandon, after whom the gallows was sometimes called the Gregorian tree, as in the prologue to "Mercurius Britannicus," acted at Paris, 1641:

This trembles under the black rod, and he
Doth fear his fate from the Gregorian tree.

An earlier hangman was named Derrick; possibly, from his name the tackle employed in raising heavy weights on board ship is still known nautically as a *derrick*.

The executioner of King Charles was probably either Dun or Brandon; yet various authorities, at different times, have charged with the deed, William Walker, Richard Brandon, Hugh Peters, Colonel Joyce, William

Hewlet, and lastly, Lord Stair. Against some of these the accusation is, of course, utterly groundless; but on the trial of the regicides after the Restoration, a distinct attempt was made to fix the act of beheading on William Hewlet. The evidence for the prosecution was worthless enough, but the court had quite made up its mind on the subject beforehand, and a verdict of guilty was returned. Hewlet was not executed, however; the insufficiency of proof was too remarkable, and the restored government had some sense of shame.

"Many have curiously inquired," says William Lilly in the 'History of his Life and Times,' "who it was that cut off the king's head; I have no permission to speak of such things, but he that did it is valiant, resolute, and of a competent fortune." After the Restoration, Lilly was examined before Parliament on the subject. "At my first appearance," he goes on, "I was affronted by the young members, who demanded several scurrilous questions, and I should have been sorely troubled but for the assistance of Mr. Prinn and Mr. Weston, who whispered to me occasionally, holding a paper before their mouths. Liberty being at last given to me to speak, I delivered what follows: 'The next Sunday but one after the execution of King Charles the First, Robert Spavin, secretary to General Cromwell, and several others, dined with me, whom the whole of our discourse was only who it was that beheaded the king; some said the common hangman, some Hugh Peters, and several others were named, but none concluded. After dinner was over, Robert Spavin retiring with me to the south window, took my hand and said: 'These are all mistaken, Lieutenant-Colonel Joyce was the man, for I was in the room when he fitted himself for the work, and stood by him when he did it; no one knows this but my master, Commissary Ireton, and myself.'"

It is certain that Lilly, although originally a royalist, was afterwards actively engaged in the cause of the Parliament, and was one of the close committee to consult upon the proper carrying out of the king's execution. He was celebrated as an astrologer and impostor, and amassed a fortune by casting nativities and foretelling events, and preying generally upon the weakness and superstition of all ranks of society. In the words of Dr. Nash, in his "Notes to Hudibras," Lilly was "a time-serving rascal," and it is necessary to use caution in placing credit upon any narrative proceeding from him.

According to Sir Nathaniel Wraxall, George Selwyn, that insatiable amateur of executions, had a different story, however, on this subject.

He professed to have obtained his information from the Duchess of Portsmouth, who, he said, always asserted, on the authority of Charles the Second, that the king his father was not beheaded by either Colonel Joyce or Colonel Pride, as was then commonly believed; but that the name of the real executioner was Gregory Brandon; that this man had worn a black crape stretched over his face, and had no sooner taken off the king's head than he was put into a boat at Whitehall Stairs, together with the block, the black cloth that covered it, the axe, and every other article that had been stained with the royal blood. Being conveyed to the Tower, all the implements used in the decapitation had been immediately reduced to ashes. A purse, containing one hundred broad pieces of gold, was then delivered to Brandon, and he was dismissed. He survived the transaction many years; but divulged it a short time before he died. "This account," Wrexall adds, "as coming from the Duchess of Portsmouth, challenges great respect."

A curious miscellany, called the "Lounger's Common Place Book," published in 1793, a favourite work with Leigh Hunt, and often quoted by him in his "History of the Town," adds to the stock of stories on the subject of Charles the First's execution, an extract from a French work called "*Délasséments de l'Homme Sensible*," professing to be written by a Monsieur d'Arnaud. It will be as well perhaps to warn the reader at the outset that the Lounger is by no means an authority upon any subject, and that his appetite for the apocryphal is almost without bounds.

The Frenchman relates, according to the Lounger, that Lord Stair, once the favourite minister of King George the Second, retiring in disgust in consequence of some real or imaginary affront received after the battle of Dettingen, and on his way to Scotland, made a short stay in London to settle some regimental accounts, when an anonymous letter in a strange hand was sent to him, requesting that he would favour the writer with an interview at a particular time and place, as he had certain information of the most singular importance to communicate. Prompted by curiosity, and moved by the tone of entreaty of the letter, the Earl, taking some precautions to ensure his own safety, went to the place appointed. He knocked at the door of a corner house adjoining an obscure alley in a remote quarter of the town. He was admitted by a ragged and forlorn-looking wretch, who conducted him up a narrow tortuous staircase to a dingy garret, dimly lighted, in one corner of which he perceived the figure of a very old

man stretched upon a narrow bed. His lordship was loaded with thanks for having condescended to comply with the request contained in the letter, which the old man avowed he had written. He offered many apologies for the trouble he had occasioned his lordship. He then made mention of many curious facts not generally known in connection with the Stair family, the Dalrymples, and finally inquired of the Earl whether he had not recently experienced much inconvenience from the want of certain title-deeds and conveyances relating to his paternal estates. His lordship admitted that such was the case, adding that for want of some particular documents he was in great danger of losing a large portion of his inheritance. The old man then pointed to a box which stood by his bedside, "There," he said, "are the writings you require. You will ask how they came into my possession,—who I am? I have led a wandering and miserable life, strangely prolonged to one hundred and twenty-five years, and I now live to behold in you a lineal descendant from me in the third generation. The fame of your gallantry has reached me. I resolved to place in your hands the contents of that box. The wretched old man you see before you was a subject, a friend, and favourite of King Charles the First; but suspecting him of having wronged, most cruelly wronged, the woman I loved, my loyalty turned to hatred, an insatiable thirst for revenge possessed me. After his trial and deposition, I requested permission to be my sovereign's executioner. This was granted to me. A moment before raising the fatal axe, I whispered in his ear the name of his victim and her avenger. But from the hour of the king's death I have been a prey to the keenest remorse, an outcast and exile in different parts of Europe and Asia; and as though to increase my punishment, Heaven has seen fit to prolong my life far beyond the common age of man. Now leave me to my fate; ask me no more; forget that you have ever seen me." Lord Stair quitted the house, to return the next day in the hope of rendering some assistance to the mysterious old man. He had disappeared, however; no trace of him could be discovered, and he was never heard of more.

M. d'Arnaud's story is curious, but, of course, worthless from an historical point of view; it will not bear the test of the simplest critical analysis. The secret as to the executioner of King Charles has been well kept, probably from its being very little of a secret at all, and capable of a solution so simple, that people in such a case were rather inclined to avoid than accept it. It was no doubt difficult to credit that a prisoner so extraordinary should



fall by the hands of the ordinary executioner of the time, like any other prisoner sentenced to death. But that this was really the case there can be little question. It is worth while to remark, however, as an element in the consideration of the trustworthiness of history, how very soon, as in this case, doubt and mystery collect round and obscure an event of

singular importance. Less than twelve years after the death of the king, the commissioners appointed to bring the regicides to judgment could not clearly ascertain who was the actual executioner, and notwithstanding that they find a prisoner guilty of the offence, doubt on still, and scruple to inflict the punishment to which they had sentenced him. DUTTON COOK.